8: Harrison D-4 (1912-1934) 1934 MI Middle East
Bedouin H34

parently meeting with no great obstacle on the way. In five minutes everybody is filled to repletion. Pounds of meat have been consumed and bushels of rice. The side dishes are empty. Enormous wooden bowls of buttermilk are brought in and the meal washed down with great draughts of this favorite Arab drink. It is not remarkable that after a feast everybody expects to take a nap. So ends the festivity and the Bedouin settles down once again to his meager and poverty-stricken existence in the desert.

Life as a nomad shepherd brings the Bedouin into naked and constant contact with nature. He is out of doors almost all of the time, and his tent with its rents and holes hardly serves to separate him from the outside world to any significant degree even when he is inside. The sun over him by day and the moon and stars by night, the long stretches of sand and the rough rocky plains, the sand storms which are the terror of the desert, the fierce heat of the summer and the frosts of the winter, all of these are his constant companions. He learns to know the wilderness as few know it. The tracks of the various animals in the sand are to him an easily legible history of the happenings of several days back. Thus he lives not simply in contact with nature but rather immersed in it. The desert may be cruel, but he pines away if transplanted. His life may be hard, but he wants nothing else.

Yet strangely enough, in spite of his intense love for the desert and its freedom, all the beauties in nature around him fall on blind eyes as far as the Bedouin is concerned. Even the desert sunset and the moon-lit sand dunes apparently stir no responsive chord in his heart. It is as if all such things had been stripped off

St Martins D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 M1 Middle East
Bedouin MJ4

and cast away as useless encumbrances in the stern fight for life. He is the victim of his environment in that he suffers so desperately from poverty and want. His clothes hang in tatters and rags; his tent is cold in winter and hot in summer; his food is reduced nearly to the limit of bare subsistence. Most of his children die because of the unsuitable food, the hard conditions of life and the ignorance of the parents. The dirt and disorder in which he lives beggar description. Out of this soil springs one of the freest and most unconquerable spirits in the world, but even so it is impossible to believe that its finest development is attainable under such handicaps. The terrible thing is not that the condition in which he lives distresses his sensitive spirit, but precisely that it does not distress him at all. The Bedouin may claim to have conquered poverty. He stands forth uncrushed by its heaviest load, but his indomitable spirit has nevertheless paid a price, and a heavy price, for that victory.

Bedouin life, however, in spite of this terrible poverty and lack of the amenities that we are accustomed to regard as necessary even to existence, has in it many characteristics that we of the luxurious and effete West might emulate with benefit. Throughout the earth and almost throughout history, men have dreamed of equality. France ran with blood a hundred and thirty years ago because of man's search for it. Russia is red with the same struggle now. Men talk about it and dream about it wherever men see visions and dream dreams. In inland Arabia men practise it, and there is a charm in the dirty, poverty-cursed, arid desert that will be searched for in vain throughout the pampered and self-satisfied world outside. His sense of equality with all the world is the breath of life to a nomad Arab, and his spirit stands

A Dickson G-S (1929-47) 1951 MS I Kuwait
Bedouins 1434

CHAPTER XXVII

Desert Guides and Trackers

622 On 27th November, 1935, I visited and had a long talk with Shaikh
619 Mutluq al Musailim, the paramount chief of the Rashaida, in his camp. Among other things he admitted that his tribe was related to the great Humaim group lying east of Madina. This is the powerful group whose paramount shaikhs are Ibn Barik and Ibn Naumas, and which as a whole is an "inferior" tribe.

495 He maintained that his people, the Rashaida, possessed without exception the finest guides throughout Arabia. He had men, he said, who could guide a stranger without any preparation from Kuwait to

(a) Damascus
(b) Amman
(c) Wejh
(d) Madina
(e) Mecca
(f) Ebha
(g) Najran
(h) Wadi Dawasir
(i) Riyadh and its environs
(j) Hasa and Qatar

485 The best guide in all Arabia was, in his opinion, Ibn Hadhabba of
428 his tribe, now employed by Ibn Sa'ud on his permanent staff. Ibn
151 Hadhabba was one of a family of that name, all of whom, even the women, seemed to be endowed with the same skill. The gift was born in these men, he said, not acquired in any way, and was akin to the sort of fifth sense an animal possessed. It mattered not if the sun shone or not by day, or if the sky was overcast at night, the Rashaidi could find his way anywhere. He never forgot a desert feature once seen, however small and insignificant.

On the other hand, Shaikh Mutluq admitted freely that his own tribe were not trackers. The palm in this science went easily to the Al Murra tribe of South Hasa and Jabrin. Tracking, or *ma'arifat al jarra* as it was called, was entirely different from the science of guiding or *ma'arifat al dalala*. The latter implied perfect knowledge of ground with a perfect eye for country, stars, etc., the former was more un-

b Dickson G-S (1949-67) 1951 M2.1 Kuwait
Bedouins 1474

Murra Trackers

canny, and consisted in an almost animal faculty for following up the tracks of man, camel, horse or sheep, and describing from the tracks the exact type of person or animal that had left its spoor. For instance, it was easy for a Murri, he said, to say whether the tracks of a single single camel were those of a white camel (*wadha*), or a brown camel (*hamra*), or a black camel (*sauda*), and still easier to say if it was male or female, in calf or not. 1485 1521

The Murra skill was so great, contended Shaikh Mutlog, that in following the tracks of a human female a tracker could say whether the person was married or single, and whether she was pregnant or not. 1485 1521

I have myself observed some very remarkable examples of Murra skill, and have been told numberless others by men like H.M. King 'Abdul 'Aziz al Sa'ud, who would have no reason to exaggerate. The Murra tribe are related to the 'Ajman, and both claim descent from Yam, the ancestor of the Bani Yam of Najran in North-East Yaman. Possibly their origin is Himyaritic. All three tribes are considered *sharif* tribes, and in appearance are all more or less alike. They have broad foreheads, eyes set wide apart, and chin running into a sharp small point. This is especially the case with the women. The apparently weak chin is, in the case of the men, usually hidden by a finer beard than is common among other Badawin.

The following is a personal experience. In February 1920 I was riding from Hufuf to Ojair in Hasa by a rather more circuitous and southern route than that usually used, as I wanted to examine the nature of certain ground. I had been the guest of Ibn Sa'ud in Hufuf for some seventeen days. My escort consisted of twelve of Ibn Sa'ud's heaves under a youth called Bani. This fine young lad told me that he had just arrived in Hufuf from Riyadh for the first time in his life, and therefore had to depend on others' knowledge of the country. Half way to the coast we met an enormous herd of Murra camels with numerous baby camels slowly grazing in a northerly direction. The country was dune country and we did not see a soul, though no doubt all our movements were being watched by a hundred eyes. 1563

Presently Bani suggested a drink of camel's milk all round. No sooner said than done. A she-camel was easily caught, milked into a panikin of wood (*jiddi*), and we all had a delightful drink. Coffee followed and we sat down for a twenty minutes' rest. Presently a

15 Thesiger T-3 (ca. 1949) 1950 MJI Saudi Arabia
Bedouin MJ4

droughts retaining trees and shrubs, which will at any rate keep them alive. 283
Under such circumstances the milk supply gets very short and the Arabs 262
suffer much from hunger, for milk is their staple food. Among the Badu in South-Western Arabia dates are a rare luxury, meat is seldom eaten except by guests for whom an animal has been slaughtered, and all grain has to be purchased in the villages.

You can see that it is a hard life with absolutely no margin. Hunger 132
and thirst, heat and cold—bitter cold. Few people realize how cold it can be in these Arabian deserts. In summer the temperature rises to 120° in the shade, and there really is no shade, and the only water which these Badu have to drink is brackish and tastes like a strong dose of Epsom salts. In winter it is nearly freezing, and at night a herdsboy will scrape [513]
a shallow trench in the sand, lie down naked in it and then cover himself 721
with his shirt. It certainly is a desperately hard life, and it is made even harder by continuous raiding and counter-raiding. Everyone is living the whole time in a state of suspense with his rifle in his hand and his eyes scanning the horizon. A herdsman sees some mounted Arabs in the distance and immediately collects his camels, which are never very numerous, and drives them off as fast as he can, for no one can afford to take any chances. If the people he has seen are friends they will signal [201]
by throwing up sand into the air or send one person forward alone waving [203]
his headcloth. Then, having established contact, they will ride over, ask the news—for Badu are always anxious to have the latest news—and let their mounts graze while they refresh themselves with the milk which the herdsman provides. Generally, to keep their herds alive at all on the scanty grazing, the Badu must scatter widely, and can put up no resistance against a raiding party which may be as many as two hundred strong. All they can do is to try to drive off their camels at the first hint of danger and, if they are robbed but themselves escape, collect their friends and set off in pursuit. The raiders consequently work fast, gather what spoil they [628]
can, and disappear. Sometimes, especially if the raid has failed and if they are pursued, they have a desperate time getting back, and, should there be a blood feud between the two tribes, they can expect no mercy if they are overtaken. I heard of one party of raiders who had raided four hundred miles, had failed to get any loot, and who, to keep themselves alive on their way back, had cut off and eaten the tails and ears of their camels. Sometimes a pursuit party from the steppes follows the raiders far into sands which are unknown to them. Should a strong wind get up and blow out the tracks, they may be lost, unable to follow the raiders to the wells which lie ahead, and unable to retrace their own tracks [271
home. Yet ordinarily the Badu are not afraid of thirst. More than once 261]
they have told me that in winter it would be hunger, not thirst, which would kill them if they were left without food or water. This is an instance of Badu exaggeration, but I have met Arabs who have lasted as long as seven days without either food or water.

Many of them are wonderful trackers, for their very lives depend upon 151
the accuracy with which they can read such signs. I remember once when 721
I was riding across the desert with some of them how we came upon some half-obliterated marks in the sand. One of our party turned aside and

Lib. Thesiger T-S (ca. 1948) 1990 MFI Saudi Arabia
Bedouin MP4

151 721 followed these tracks for about two hundred yards. He then came back to us and said that fifteen Awamir from the north had raided the Jenabba near the southern coast, lifted three of their camels, watered at a certain well, and passed this way twelve days before. I myself could not have been certain that the tracks were even the tracks of camels, they were so blown by the wind, but he had read the whole story. We had been out of touch with all Arabs for over a month, but when we met Badu they confirmed that this raid had taken place exactly as he had said. It is, however, a mistake to think that all Badu can track. Some of them are as bad at tracking as they are at guiding, but when you meet a good tracker or a good guide his skill is uncanny.

181 577 609 574 You might think that a life like this, where to keep alive at all is only just possible, was bound to degenerate into a brutish struggle for survival. But this is not so. These Badu are, it is true, hard and ruthless, avaricious and impatient of restraint, yet no people are so generous. They will give away their clothes literally from off their backs, and they are brave, loyal to each other, courteous, patient, and unselfish. I have spent the greater part of the last five years with them, and I have found it hard indeed to live up to their standards of decency. Arab hospitality is famous, but I wonder if you realize what it implies. The Badu do not ask someone to dinner when they have got something extra or when they feel inclined. One or two or half a dozen people are travelling past, see an encampment, and decide to spend the night there, for the traveller in the desert takes a free meal of anyone he sees. The host and his family are probably almost starving, yet everything they have is routed out and set before their self-invited guests, whom they may never have seen before, and if possible they will slaughter an animal for their dinner. I have often received this hospitality, and even now it makes me uncomfortable, though my host has sent me away in the morning feeling that it really was I who had conferred a kindness on him. Of course, another time it is one's host who is travelling and taking meals off someone else, so it evens up, I suppose. But it is not that; it is the wonderful, open-hearted, ungrudging way in which they do it. I am afraid I have always resented the sight of unwanted guests when we were short of food.

576 264 When travelling they always divide up their food before each meal and then draw lots for it, otherwise there is invariably an argument, never because someone says he has been given too little, but because he maintains that he has received too much. Among semi-settled Arabs, where the strict Badu conventions are not necessarily observed, you soon see how [271] quickly it is resented when someone always takes the largest piece. Once 576 we reached a well after we had been twenty-four hours without water, yet no one would drink when we arrived because some of our party had lingered behind to graze their camels, and they would only drink when [486] everyone was there. The bond which exists between travelling companions is indeed tremendously strong; it is only this which makes travelling possible at all. If you are accompanied by a tribesman from a hostile tribe, you are safe from that tribe while he is with you, and he 577 would fight in your defence even against his own brothers. To betray a companion is the blackest crime which a Badu can commit; but it goes